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Assessing different perceptions towards the importance of a work-life balance: a comparable study between thai and international programme students

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Abstract

This paper has the objectives of evaluating the different perceptions of Chulalongkorn students who are registered within Thai and International Curriculum towards the understanding and awareness of the concept of Well-being with a key focus on the importance of a Work Life Balance (WLB). Sixty five questionnaires were distributed among students who undertook courses offering aspects of WLB as part of the Introduction of Recreation for Thai curriculum and Effective Career Management for International Curriculum during second semester 2013. Data analysis was processed by statistical programming software and accordingly categorized into groups of data by thematic analysis. The findings revealed that two groups of students had a high awareness of WLB importance and stated that this concept is essential to ensure an optimal and valued life as well as the development of knowledge and skills from the educational system. However, both of them stated the problem of limited WLB in practice due to an overload of university's assignments and projects but they have acknowledged a desire to adopt the WLB concept through recreational activities outside of and after their studies. Furthermore, students who has undertaken Thai curriculum perceived that most of the university's facilities and activities offered definitive aspects of a WLB more than other groups held the general perception that the university should improve those ones. The paper delivers an in-depth Discussion ending with a conclusion encompassing all aspects noted and then looks further to the importance and future implications of this research which presents the extra-curricula activities that university should conduct to improve students' quality of life and WLB.

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Keywords: Work-Life Balance; Thai Students; Leisure and Recreation; Leisure of students

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1. Introduction

In recent times, Work-Life Balance (WLB), the concept of balancing work and leisure-time in harmony with physical, emotional, and spiritual health (Simmons 2012), has become an essential concern for many organisations. The reason being that better work-life balance employees are more influenced towards job retention and focus (Susi and Jawaharrani 2010), as well as overall satisfaction in work and life (Guest 2002). Such claims are supported by numerous studies including Greenhaus *et al.* (2002), Guest (2002) and Wong and Go (2009), many of which identify that individuals are more likely to have an improved quality of life, mental health or well-being when he or she can balance both their working lives and life outside of work. Additionally, further content acknowledge the ability of a WLB to influence a healthy lifestyle, highlighting the importance of leisure and recreation to encourage well-being (Godbey 1999), to act as a stress buffering role (Coleman 1993; Coleman and Iso-Aloha 1993; Trainor *et al.* 2009) and foster a higher quality of life (Lloyd and Auld 2002) and equally as important, to increase work productivity and efficiency (Guest 2002).

In addition to the concern for WLB by organisations and business, there is also a risen awareness concerning academic lifestyles, several studies focusing on WLB regarding the condition of teachers (Bubb and Earley 2004), academic and support staff aspects (Doherty and Manfredi 2006) and the viewpoint of students in many levels such as highschool (Tausig and Fenwick 2001); college (Doble and Supriya 2010); and doctoral students (Martinez *et al.* 2013). In regard to students, it was revealed by Doble and Supriya (2010) that a balanced student lifestyle can be accomplished by effective time management, healthy eating, being active, setting goals and priorities, encouraging successful degree completion (Brus 2006; Stimson and Filer 2011; Matinez *et al.* 2013). However, some may struggle to obtain life balance from individual factors such as personality, personal control and ability to cope under stress and pressure, gender, age and so on (Guest 2002). Students can also be caught in a state of imbalance within educational domains primarily due to a lack of time and overloaded schedules (Matinez *et al.* 2013) such as keeping up with schoolwork (Misra and McKean 2000), excessive homework (Frazer and Kohn 1986; Doble and Supriya 2010) and assessment deadlines (Misra and McKean 2000). All of which further impose stress upon students, as noted such 'unwell-being' holds the potential to negatively impact both physical and mental impairment (Murphy and Archer 1996) and is in conflict with student productivity and effective time management. According to Grund *et al.* (2014) it is not only academic success that is sufficient for students, on the contrary, they should hold a keen focus on leisure time and other activities also in order to be successful students. Hence, it can represent the connection to WLB by the context that students should concentrate on school's work along with leisure time. As Chulalongkorn University, the first university of Thailand has a focal point from University Desired Characteristics of Graduate stated in the university's policy that students should maintain their well-being and deal with pressure along with aspects of education in order to be valuable in a global society (Chulalongkorn University Council 2010). This also implies that ideally students may be better for not only focusing on an academic perspective, but also taking into consideration their well-being and other aspects of a work-life balance. However, there are limited studies concerning the perceptions of Chulalongkorn students on whether they perceived their life balance to be influencing their well-being or characteristics of such.

Considering the relationship between WLB and well-being, this research aims to examine the connection of these two aspects along with leisure and recreation as the supportive approach for students well-being by assessing different perceptions toward the importance of WLB from a comparative study between Thai and International Programme Students that evaluates the differences of their WLB, self-leisure management for well-being by using recreational activities. Additionally, assessing the perceptions of these two groups towards the activities and facilities that university are offering in order to discover if the activities and facilities are sufficient to encourage students' WLB and well-being.

2. Objectives

- To examine relations between work life balance and relevant context including well-being and leisure and recreation
- To assess the different students' perceptions towards the concept of work-life balance and the activities and facilities that university provide for.

2. Literature Review

3.1 Work-life balance, Well-being and Leisure and Recreation

The concept of work-life balance has been a concern since the 1980's in reaction to the unhealthy work-life choices that employees were making, struggling to find valued time for their personal life neglecting family, friends and leisure activities in order to carry out the work goals (Kumar and Shivakumar 2011). The imbalance of work and life has been considered as 'a problem that primarily harms individual life quality and well-being' (Kofodimos 1993; xvii). This problem was from working long hours and undertaking often overbearing workloads (Kodz *et al.* 2002), eventually causing a high level of work stress and stress related illness (Jones and Bright 2001). Giving that concern, the term has later been broadened over various areas of work as the WLB programme of enhancing employee experience of work and non-work domains (Cascio 2000) by indicating the benefits to the individual employee, workplace and society of achieving a WLB (Greenblatt 2002; de Cieri *et al.* 2005; Popcock 2005; Bryson *et al.* 2007; McDonald *et al.* 2007; Fereday and Oster 2008). Those benefits include the tendency towards quality of life, mental health or well-being (Wong and Go 2009).

In relation to academia, WLB is also perceived as School-Work-life Balance (Matinez *et al.* 2013) and in the effective time management strategy of students by sharing the similar idea of achieving productive academic performance whilst having personal leisure time and activities to alleviate stress (Misra and McKean 2000). The over excessive focus on studying (Grund *et al.* 2014), excessive workloads and stress from related college or university's work are also indicated in students' perspective as affecting their ability to achieve their balance in life (Doble and Supriya 2011). Such problems concerning students over stressing with work are important to universities as several offer the facilities or centres with students' WLB counsellors such as University of Michigan, Johns Hopkins University and University of Illinois at Chicago. While other educational institutes also provide leisure and recreation facilities, as both are referred to increase the well-being of students, quality of life (Lloyd and Auld 2002), stress prevention (Coleman 1993; Coleman and Iso-Aloha 1993; Trainor *et al.* 2009) and self-development (Trainor *et al.* 2009).

Leisure, itself has a variety of meanings; in general it concerns 'free time' and 'free choice' of activity (Kraus 2001) and the opposite to work (Dumazedier 1967; Torkildsen 2005). While recreation, has a wide range of definitions, it has an involvement with recreation as recreation activities which should contain aspects of 'relaxation', 'fun' and 'pleasure' (Torkildsen 2005) are activities in which people participate during their leisure time as an approach of improving social cohesion and quality of life (Torkildsen 2005). Together, they are perceived as an effective approach in developing a mentally healthy student life that have freedom of choice concerning their own areas of interest and attending recreational activities (Yildiz *et al.* 2012). Scott and Willits (1998) classify leisure activities as socialising with friends or relatives; participating in creative or artistic activities; reading or studying; participating in sports and participating in fraternal or community organisation. Moreover, concerning the leisure and recreation among students, social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram may also be included as it is the fastest growing and most popular of internet-based technologies with young people including higher education students (Roblyer *et al.* 2010). Regarding the function of social networks, it allows individuals to present themselves, establish or maintain connections with others (Ellison *et al.* 2007) alongside meeting with people with similar interests (Haythorhwaite 2005), therefore, social networks could possibly be grouped in a social perspective of recreation or as socialising with friends or relatives of leisure activities as previously reviewed.

3.2 The Context of Chulalongkorn University

In the context of Chulalongkorn University, even though a centre of WLB has not as yet been established, there are numerous factors which indicate that this university focuses on the well-being of its students more so than from the view of academic achievement; study-life balance implication, for instance, the university's policy of desired graduates needed well-being in physical and emotional perspectives along with other academic components (Chulalongkorn University Council 2010), CU Wellness and Health Promoting University which are the projects concerning happiness and well-being of academic staff and students in the university, and other recreation activities conducted by students including freshmen welcoming, sport day and student drama project. Moreover, the facilities regarding well-being reinforcement based on the typology of leisure previously as indicated, such as creative and artistic perspective; university provides Chamchuri art gallery and Chulalongkorn University Values Integration

Program as known as CUVIP which offers a variety of extra-curriculum activities including creative activities; libraries and Information Technology support respecting reading or studying; common areas and public-WIFI access are available for socialisation with friends in persons or by social network; sport facilities including sport complex, health and recreation center and health services for physical recreation (Student Service and Facilities, Chulalongkorn University Official Website 2014); and lastly, volunteering projects and university clubs are conducted by a variety of faculties in order to encourage students to practice social responsibility and participation in interesting recreational activities in different clubs, which can be perceived as participating in fraternal or community organisation.

In summary, as well-being and the quality of life of students are largely hinged on their balance in life (Doble and Supriya 2011), and with the involvement of well-being and leisure (Trainors *et al.* 2009), therefore the specific hypotheses in this research were (1) students from Thai and International Program had similar perceptions towards the importance of WLB, nevertheless (2) from their difference of programmes, the pattern of WLB from time spending were different as well as their stress and well-being levels and leisure and recreation for encouraging their WLB. (3) They also had different perceptions of leisure and recreation facilities offered by the university which Thai programme perceived more positively than international programmed students.

4. Methodologies

4.1 Populations

There were 65 respondents of Thai and International programmed students from Chulalongkorn University who have registered in the second semester of the academic year of 2013. Background information on these respondents is shown in findings section.

4.2 Methodology and Procedure

The questionnaires and open-ended questions developed by the researcher were employed to achieve study objective regarding WLB in 17 items (13 items of rating scale and 4 items of opened ended questions). The content of the questionnaires were investigated for validity by 3 expertises in well-being and recreation and are represented in the index of item objectives congruence (IOC) equivalent as 0.82. The reliability of questionnaires by indicating Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient at 0.78 The procedure of methodology started by 1) Studies of theories, principles from relevant documents and researches; 2) Indication of structure of WLB evaluation form by covering contents in order to develop questionnaires and submit to expertises considering the validity; 3) Questionnaires pilot study regarding the reliability of questionnaires and; 4) data collection and analysis and research's results report. Research methodology was conducted during November 2013 to February 2014.

4.3 Data Analysis

Samples responded their opinions towards a Likert Scale. Then, data was processed by statistical programme software which indicated frequency percentage, mean and standard deviation. The research used t-test (two-tailed) in order to investigate a difference between two means of two normal population: independent samples. Following the previous phase, thematic analysis was used to group the data from rating scale and further comments into the following categories: daily time spending and factors influencing unwell WLB, leisure and recreation activities consumption and extra-curricula activities that the university has provided in order to encourage students' WLB. Thereafter, all collected data was interpreted and analysed for the broader objectives of these studies.

5. Findings

Sixty-five questionnaires were completed by the students from various faculties (Architectures, Arts, Commerce and Accountancy, Economics, Education, Engineering, Psychology, and Science including Office of Commission on Agricultural Resource Education) studied the subject of WLB in the courses of Introduction to Recreation (32 Thai Programme Students) and Effective Career Management (33 International Programme Students). It revealed that the gender ratio of the participant was 61.5% female (40 of samples) to 38.5% male (25 of samples) and student year ratio were 26.2% 1st year (17 of samples), 27.7% 2nd year (18 of samples), 33.8% 3rd year (22 of samples) and

12.3% 4th year (8 of samples). The perceptions of students towards the WLB topics are presented as the statistical table in Table 1 as follows.

According to table 1, results indicated the items that students from Thai Programme agreed most were the item 1, 'I am aware of the importance of a work-life balance' ($\bar{X} = 4, SD = 0.73$), following by item 4, 'I am aware of the importance of a work-life balance for having well-being' ($\bar{X} = 3.96, SD = 0.59$) and item 9, 'I am aware that leisure and recreation encouraging having better well-being' ($\bar{X} = 3.96, SD = 0.76$) in the same mean. On the other hand, International Programme students agreed most in the item 9, 'I am aware that leisure and recreation encouraging having better well-being' ($\bar{X} = 4.21, SD = 0.74$), following by item 1, 'I am aware of the importance of a work-life balance' ($\bar{X} = 4.12, SD = 0.70$). Comparison of perceptions between two groups, it represented only difference at Item 11, 'University offers activities and facilities relevant to recreation and work-life balance in order to have well-being' which the statistical significance was 0.05 ($t = .017^*$). The overall results were discussed by using three themes regarding WLB of Chulalongkorn University from questionnaires' open-ended questions and can be categorised into 3 groups which are

4.1 Perceptions towards WLB Importance

The findings revealed that concerning the awareness of WLB importance itself, WLB as encouraging well-being and WLB as pressure and stress control (Item 1, 4 and 6 respectively), both of Thai and International programmed students had high agreement of those items. Nevertheless, in practice, as shown in item 2, 5 and 7 and 12; both of group least agreed that they are actually able to balance work and personal life. There was no statistical significance between the two groups among these topics, however, overall Thai students perceived they can balance work and life ($\bar{X} = 3.44, SD = 0.70$) over international programmed students ($\bar{X} = 3.39, SD = 0.90$). Regarding the open-ended section, in the daily time spending and factors influencing a poor WLB, both of groups indicated that they spent time in lectures and with academic work including commuting time to university most by average of 14 hours a day, while personal time as sleeping, time spending with family and friends, leisure and recreation, and so on are the rest, for 10 hours a day, it was revealed that students had spent that time in work and work related aspects more so than with personal time. Moreover, the statistic table also indicated that Thai programme students agreed to living nearby university to minimise commuting time ($\bar{X} = 3.70, SD = 1.41$) over international students ($\bar{X} = 3.12, SD = 1.29$) in item 3. While other factors expressed by students from different groups similarly indicating that their WLB was adversely affected by poor time management in the majority of comments, followed by dealing with an overload of assignments, the distance of commuting from accommodation to university and part-time work respectively. Numbers of students in open-end section also indicated that understanding and practicing the concept of WLB to be essential to ensure an optimal and valued life as well as the development of knowledge and skills from the educational system.

Table 1: The perceptions of students towards the work-life balance topics

Items	Topics relevant to work-life balance	Thai Programme		International Programme		t-test (two-tailed)
		\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD	
1.	I am aware the importance of a work-life balance	4.00	0.73	4.12	0.70	.739
2.	I have enough time after studying to carry out personal matters including spending time with family and friends	3.30	0.91	3.42	0.90	.850
3.	I live nearby university to minimise the commuting time	3.70	1.41	3.12	1.29	.118
4.	I am aware of the importance of a work-life balance for having well-being	3.96	0.59	3.91	0.80	.743
5.	I have well-being from a work-life balance	3.52	0.70	3.33	0.74	.359

6.	I am aware of Importance of Work Life Balance for pressure or stress control	3.93	0.78	3.91	0.72	.623
7.	I can manage my pressure or stress control from a work-life balance	3.48	0.75	3.33	0.85	.209
8.	I am aware that leisure and recreation encouraging having a better work- life balance	3.81	0.74	4.03	0.81	.756
9.	I am aware that leisure and recreation encouraging having better well-being	3.96	0.76	4.21	0.74	.424
10.	I have time to participate in leisure and recreation activities to encourage my work-life balance and well-being	3.48	0.70	3.76	0.83	.503
11.	University offers activities and facilities relevant to recreation and a work- life balance in order to have well-being	3.44	0.70	3.06	0.83	.017*
12.	From studying in work-life balance topic, I am more aware of balancing my study and life for better well-being	3.67	0.62	3.91	0.77	.474
13.	Overall perception about work-life balance I feel my work-life is balanced	3.44	0.70	3.39	0.90	.713

* $p < 0.05$

4.2 Leisure and recreation activities participation in order to encourage WLB and Well-being

Similarly to the previous theme, there was no statistical significance between the different groups, concerning item 8, 9, 10. Both groups, again, agreed in the similar levels that more awareness of leisure and recreation would encourage WLB and Well-Being in item 8 and 9, however, it was revealed in item 10 that they agreed less in having time to participate in those leisure and recreation activities to which international programmed students agreed ($\bar{X} = 3.76$, $SD = 0.83$) more than Thai ($\bar{X} = 3.48$, $SD = 0.70$). Regarding the open-ended section, leisure and recreational activities daily input differed as Thai student programmed indicated the use of social networks the most, followed by game playing and music listening. On the other hand, international students participated in watching TV, engaging in sport activities and playing games mostly at the same level, followed by time spent on social networks and other activities including eating out, clubbing, and meditation.

4.3 Extra-curricula activities that university has provided in order to encourage students' WLB

According to table 1, item 11 was only item that had the statistical significance which was 0.05 ($t = .017^*$), it revealed Thai programmed students had significantly higher level of agreement that the university offers activities and facilities relevant to recreation and work-life balance in order to foster well-being ($\bar{X} = 3.44$, $SD = 0.70$) compared to International programmed students ($\bar{X} = 3.06$, $SD = 0.83$) which the result can be evidentially supported by the open-ended section as a number of students suggested that there was not sufficient information regarding facilities and activities for international students by faculty or university. Moreover, this open-ended section also revealed the different perceptions towards extra-curricula activities that have been conducted by university or faculty; the activities that Thai students perceived could encourage their WLB the most were volunteer camping, followed by a sport complex and other sport facilities then university's clubs. On the other hand, most international programmed students indicated an international sport game event, followed by a freshmen welcoming event and volunteer camping subsequently.

6. Discussion And Conclusion

The results of this research indicated a match with the hypotheses, it can be concluded that both of Thai and International programme students of Chulalongkorn University have been aware of the importance of WLB and the influence of it in order to maintain their well-being which is one of the characteristics of a desired graduate including the importance of leisure and recreation as an approach towards a WLB for well-being maintenance (Godbey 1999) and as a stress buffer (Coleman 1993; Coleman and Iso-Aloha 1993; Trainor *et al.* 2009). However, they were able to balance their work and life to promote well-being yet expressed less ability to lower pressure and control stress in practice compared to their awareness of its importance mainly because of poor time management as previously noted in the literature review of student WLB obstacles (Matinez *et al.* 2013) along with an overload of assignment work (Doble and Supriya 2011). Despite this, the two groups indicated different leisure and recreation activities for their WLB as Thai students spent most of their time in Social Network, while international students engaged the most in watching Television, games and sport activities. Another difference from comparative study was the perceptions towards activities and facilities offered by the University relevant to recreation and work- life balance in order to encourage and maintain well-being; higher numbers of Thai students agreed that those facilities and activities especially volunteer camping a recreation that allows students to practice community service and participation in the area camp was perceived to be possibly the most encouraging activity towards a WLB. Whilst the majority of international students perceived that socializing recreational activities by university offered more, such as international Chulalongkorn sport games as they acknowledged that they can get to know new friends and encourage their networking abilities. As leisure is a matter of 'free choice' and 'free time' (Kraus 2001), hence it is not surprised that students had different leisure and recreation activities in order to balance their work and lives to sustain a positive quality of life (Torkidsen 2005) from their freedom of choice. Hence, the component of well-being as a desired characteristic of graduates has been perceived and adapted through the inclusion of leisure and recreation although it is difficult to participate sometimes due to the indicating factors.

Nevertheless, the results also revealed a problem concerning the limited promotion of recreational activities and facilities conducted by the university as indicated by international programme students. They commented that they barely knew about the recreation programs the university provides. Moreover, numbers of students commented in the open-ended question that they would like the university to provide new activities as well as the existing ones, when asked 'which extra-curricular activities that are not already conducted by the university and that could encourage WLB would you want?'; students replied with such activities as handicraft projects, yoga, meditation classes and so on. Consequently, relevant units that are conducting these activities should be publicised and stronger promotion on a wide range of activities should be emphasised.

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